



Tree Flowers

By Monroe S. Miller

Reference to a "well kept secret" is usually reserved for things like restaurants and vacation hideaways and even golf courses (Crystal Downs near Cheryl's hometown of Frankfort, Michigan is one of those). I reserve this phrase for that good used bookstore whose stock is fresh and varied and whose prices are low. And it seems to fit one of nature's least recognized yet most beautiful creations — tree flowers.

I make a distinction between "tree flowers" and "blossoms". It's a distinction of the obvious and has nothing to do with anatomy or taxonomy. Flowering crabapple trees have blossoms. Fruit trees like pear, plum, apple and cherry have blossoms. Lilacs and serviceberries have blossoms. On the other hand, oak and maple and ash and locust have flowers. That is probably a simple-minded distinction (which fits me to a tee!) to the serious botanist.

I also think of it this way: woody ornamentals we plant primarily for a one-time show in spring have blossoms and all other woody ornamentals (except evergreens) have tree flowers.

Why so few people talk about tree flowers has always baffled me. Most of them, when asked about tree flowers, almost always reply, "Oh, you mean like lilacs and flowering crabs?" Lots are surprised when I show them tree flowers on the golf course — "never thought to look," they say. They associate "flowers" with annuals and perennials in the beds and borders at home and around the clubhouse grounds and on the golf course. They think of lilacs and flowering crabs because they are so overwhelming when in bloom. That's amplified in our town because the University of Wisconsin Arboretum has one of the finest lilac collections in the country.

I'd guess another reason so few people know about tree flowers is that they so seldom look up, especially when under a tree. They'll look skyward for a weather check, to watch an airplane or to gush over a rainbow. But not many

find a need to do any of those while looking up and through the crown of a tree.

Make no mistake — I love springtime blossoms as much as anyone. They help make each spring season unforgettable. I've always said that apple trees don't have to produce fruit to justify their existence. The site of an apple tree in full bloom with white or pink blossoms in clusters almost as big as apples themselves is quite enough for me, thank you. That is why we plant them on the golf course.

Tree flowers, on the other hand, are rather unexpected; they're extras of a sort. We plant trees because of their form, their autumn color, their texture, their size. Seldom are their flowers a consideration. But they are a real treat when spring comes around. Each year it is a fresh delight to see trees that produce flowers every bit as beautiful as flowers grown in a garden.

I have a list of favorites. It is almost impossible to rank them from first place to last place — there isn't really a last place. I wouldn't know what criteria to use. Suffice to say I simply like these nine tree flowers best of all.

Since none is first (or ninth, for that matter), let me begin with the one which appears the earliest — the maple tree flower. Understand that these are not the very first trees to bloom; that honor, on our golf course, usually belongs to the willows. There are a lot of species of maple, but I think the most beautiful flowers are on the red maple and the Norway maple.

The red and Norway flowers are small and delicate. I like to use a hand lens to look at them and really enjoy their beauty. The bark of these two trees adds to the impact of their flowers. When the bud scales are shed and the scarlet flowers of the red maple contrast with the light gray bark, the only rival is the Norway's greenish yellow flowers against the dark, nearly black bark. Each tree is like a huge glowing bouquet, despite such small flowers. The mass impact comes because the garnet-red and pale green

flowers bloom in clusters. If pressed to choose between these two flowers, I'd probably pick the red maple because red isn't a spring color and that makes their crimson clouds seem more vivid.

It is easy to understand why *Cercis canadensis* is called the redbud, although neither the bud nor the flower itself is really red. At first the bud is almost red, but when the flowers are at their prime, they are definitely pink. The bud, which looks something like the sharpened end of a wooden pencil, is darker and gives birth to a purplish pink flower. The flowers appear in clusters held tightly on almost all of the branches. They appear before the leaves are out and really give a beautiful sight. We have several at the club, and when I landscaped around our house ten years ago, I planted a redbud right next to the front door. These tree flowers are welcome when they arrive between late April and mid-May.

Just about the time the pink redbud tree flowers are fading away, the dogwood comes into full rapturous white bloom. The dogwoods are excellent landscape plants which are found in the countryside, too. They are beautiful in all seasons, but they are most conspicuous in spring when their flowers are fully open. Like the tree flowers I've described so far, this one is small. It might not appear so because they grow in clusters.

There is a legend about the dogwood and its flowers that certainly enhances my love of it. The tale says that at the time of Christ's crucifixion the dogwood was a large tree that rivaled the oak and that Christ died on a cross made from the dogwood. According to the story, Jesus sensed the distress of the wood over its cruel role. He told the dogwood it should grow slender and crooked so that it could never be used as a cross again and therefore would never again experience such sorrow and suffering. Christ also declared that the tree would bear flowers that were shaped like a cross with two long and two short petals. There would be a "crown of thorns" in the center of each flower.

The edges of the petals would forever after carry stigmata as brown as rust and blood so that each of us looking at the dogwood would remember.

Regardless of your religious convictions, there is a certain poignancy to the story that will help you recall it when you see the dogwood tree

flowers.

The flowers I have confessed to liking so much up to now are smallish. I think their impact on me and others is disproportionate to their size because they come into bloom before the trees leaf out. They don't have to compete with leaves for attention. The rest of my favorite tree flowers appear **after** the trees are fully in leaf. Another reason these early flowers are so intriguing and capture my fancy is that they appear before the major spring blossoms — lilacs and apples. Granted, the magnolias are blooming in early spring, but there aren't nearly as many of them as there are apples and lilacs.

Any tree flowers that can successfully compete with lilac and apple blossoms and with fully opened leaves for attention have to be truly exceptional. And these last few certainly are. They are exceptional in size, in beauty and in fragrance.

Mid-May to late May where I live is when we are treated to the gorgeous horse-chestnut. I've got two horse-chestnut trees on my golf course and, frankly, that's all I want. They aren't the greatest golf course tree. The wood is weak and the tree suffers in many summer storms. They are messy if close to play, especially in the fall with the nuts,

husks and leaves. But every golf course should have one just for the tree flowers.

These tree flowers are a sight for gods and men. They are large and showy and quite long lasting. The ones we enjoy are white in color and grow in upright panicles over a foot long. This very vertical growth looks neat in comparison to the nearly horizontal spread of the young leaves. Some people call it the "hyacinth tree" because the flowers are so similar and smell so good.

The end flowers bloom first, then the side buds. Each of these white flowers is dotted with purple and yellow, is scalloped and about an inch across. They are as beautiful as any cultivated garden flower. They make it worth having a horse-chestnut or two on your golf course.

Trying to describe emerging shagbark hickory leaves is difficult. I'm probably in error including the opening of hickory buds among paragraphs about tree flowers. Trust me when I say the bud opening presents a show as beautiful as any tree flower or any blossom.

The new leaf buds on hickory branches put on a truly master display. In our town, they start to open in mid-May when the temperatures warm into the

seventies every once in awhile. The buds swell rapidly to a size bigger than your thumb. Then they force back their green husks and you get to see a reddish pink capsule. The warm sunny days force the pinkish sheath to open. The whole thing reminds you of an orchid. As you watch this beauty unfold, day by day, you will almost be certain that some exotic complex flower will soon appear from the salmon pink sheaths. What comes out are not huge tree flowers but rather five and sometimes seven lime green leaves. Although the buds are large, you'll wonder, after a week passes, how in the world so much was packed into that bud. The actual flowers are a disappointment after seeing the dramatic leaf opening. We're lucky at our golf course because we have dozens of shagbark hickory trees, and in the spring, thousands and thousands of opening buds. Beautiful.

There is a letdown of sorts after Memorial Day. All of my favorite tree flowers up until now are gone. The apples are done. Usually the lilacs are over. The business of summer is at hand. Days are getting close to being hot. But then the black locusts bloom.

The black locust reminds you that tree flowers impact senses other than
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sight. If you think the flowers of the mock orange or Koreanspice viburnum smell good, wait until you smell the fragrance of the black locust flower.

These flowers appear after the leaves, which are also late to develop. Lots of people don't care for the tree. In fact, my suspicion is that it would be difficult to find one for sale in a nursery. But I think they are valued trees. They are interesting simply because they are legumes, just like peas and alfalfa. They are able to fix nitrogen in the same way. The pods they produce aren't large enough to be a bother, and the smallish leaves (leaflets, actually) are an attractive soft green. The shade is light and allows grass to grow beneath the tree. So there is logic in having a few of them on your golf course.

But the flowers, my God the flowers, make you think you should have hundreds of these trees on your golf course.

We've got scores of these trees in a wooded, out-of-play area on our property. The first tee, ninth green and eighth tee are tucked in amongst them. Most of the time you aren't really aware of them, or at least of how many of them there are.

Until after Memorial Day. Then the smell of these flowers overtake the whole golf course. Golf, for about a week, is a sensuous delight as the aroma is wafted about. Irresistibly one steps close to the flowers to inhale from the heart of a bloom, although the fragrance is actually more distinct and better from a few steps back. I don't want to imply that it's a heavy, sickening sweet fragrance like some perfumes. You could live all day with the locust fragrance and still love it.

And the flowers are very pretty. They are cream-white and grow in five or six inch clusters looking, not surprisingly, like pea flowers. The black locust trees, from a distance, have a foamy green kind of whiteness that I think complements both the aroma and the golf course. It's easy for me to justify having transplanted several around the course, usually near a green or a tee.

Following the black locust bloom, at a time when you just about figure it isn't possible for anymore trees to flower, comes the catalpa. The catalpa tree is another one of those you really only need a few of on a golf course. The pods — we call them "cigars" — seem to drop constantly and are huge. The tree bark is not particularly outstanding. The leaves are interesting but very coarse and also very big. It isn't unusual for them to be a foot across. The tree has some health problems — we think some of ours have suffered from *Verticillium* wilt. Although they prosper in lousy soil conditions and dry summers, I'm just not a great fan of them.

Except when they produce their flowers. Then I love them. These flowers are in proportion to everything else on this tree — the pods, the leaves, the long straight trunk. They are huge and are arranged in upright panicles almost a foot high. The flowers themselves are a couple of inches across and are a creamy white to pure white. They've got yellow and brown markings on them. Our trees are all pruned very high and every once in awhile I have an employee lift me up in the bucket of the loader when it is nearby so that I can see these flowers up close. When they fall or are blown from the tree by strong winds, the ground under the

trees seems covered with snow.

The last tree flower of the year, for me anyway, is the linden. Like the black locust, they are loved by most for the aroma of the flowers, although this tree is a superb urban landscape tree. The flowers, which are small and pendulous, are certainly pretty although somewhat inconspicuous because of the dense foliage of the tree. They are somewhere between white and yellow in color. They rival the black locust in the way they smell — a great treat for your nose. You have to be careful when getting close to linden flowers — the bees love them and work hard at harvesting the blossoms. Usually there are so many honey bees in the trees when they are flowering that there is a sound not unlike the sound of distant, rushing water. In fact, look carefully at your local farmers' market or on the shelves of a gourmet food store — usually you can find linden flower honey. These trees make getting an ice cream cone at Babcock Hall during flowering time an extra special treat — Babcock Hall is located on the UW campus on . . . Linden Drive! The ice cream is doubly delicious.

An artist, discussing tree flowers, long ago said this: "It's too discouraging for a painter. Look at the colors in this blossom — the design — the delicate shading — wonderful! A man could spend a lifetime with paint and canvas and never come close to producing a single masterpiece like this one little blossom. Yet this one tree produces thousands of them."

Look up this spring and enjoy the thousands of these masterpieces we all have on our golf courses.

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